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ABSTRACT

According to a 1994 survey of higher education administrators and state politicians, the following are perceived as the biggest problems facing American higher education in the next millennium: meeting increased demands at a time of decreased resources; increasing or maintaining access; using technology more efficiently; and sharing resources across state lines so that colleges and universities will not need to be all things to all people. Successful distance programs can increase access to education, provide valuable service to adult learners, and make excellent use of technology. Unforunately, few institutions initiate distance education programs to reap those benefits. Academic departments have no strong mandate and few incentives to adjust their curriculum and instruction to fit distance education beyond cursory cooperation. Some institutions are failing to tailor their distance education programs to the needs of adult learners, and others are initiating such programs primarily to solve their budget problems. Education leaders who, however covertly, consider distance education programs the poor stepchild of higher education send tacit messages that off-campus programs and students are inferior. Those messages in turn militate against curricular and instructional adaptations for distance education and limit the amount of support for the human infrastructure needed to make distance programs work. (MN)

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A FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM WITH DISTANCE PROGRAMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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The Seduction

Many people are enchanted now with distance education but there are vexing challenges facing educators who get into it. These include providing efficient service and support to students off campus, adjusting instructional methods to fit a new delivery mode, creating curriculum and programs of study that appeal to prospective learners, establishing local contacts to help run the programs, maintaining an infrastructure to manage programs off campus, earning credibility among traditional academics, and maintaining education quality. All of these challenges relate to the human connections in distance programs. State of the art technology cannot make an off campus program successful; a well planned initiative will fail without sufficient human support. This is a simple concept for institutions doing, say, nuclear research yet attrition in off campus programs is high and failure is common. So what's the problem?

In 1994, a survey was made (Basom & Sherritt) of higher education administrators and state politicians to determine what they perceived to be the major problems facing American higher education in the next Millennium. Following are the four most often sited responses:

1. Meeting increased demands at a time of decreased resources;
2. Increasing or maintaining access;
3. Using technology more efficiently;
4. Sharing resources across state lines so that colleges and universities won't have to be *all things to all people*.

Distance programs promise to address all of these issues. Consequently, the distance education bandwagon seduces seriously stressed higher education decision makers looking for solutions to overwhelming problems.

A Horse Driven Cart

Successful distance programs can increase access to education, provide valuable service to adult learners, make excellent use of technology, support education networks across state lines, and meet a very real education need. Unfortunately, few institutions go into distance programs to reap these benefits. Most view distance programs as a way to compete with other institutions for scarce human resources and, therefore, mitigate their pressing economic problems. *In short, off campus programs are used to make money for on campus programs.* It's a horse driven cart. Distance programs are expected to support traditional programs and, indirectly, constituents off campus. A better approach would be to provide distance education for the direct benefit of off campus learners with the possibility of reaping some profit for campus operations. This subtle difference relegates distance programs to an inferior status and generates problems.

The Problems

- Many higher education decision makers view distance programs as second rate, a necessary but deficient form of education.
- This attitude pervades academic departments which have no strong mandate to adjust their curriculum and instruction to fit distance learning beyond cursory cooperation. In fact, there are few rewards. Tenure and promotion usually does not recognize excellent off campus teaching which, in fact,

takes valuable time away from research agendas. This, in turn, wins no kudos for academic departments which commit resources to distance programs that could be used to bolster publications (hence reputation), cover classes on campus, and secure grants. In fact, there is little reason beyond increasing student numbers for academic departments to support distance programs. A 1992 study (Caffarella et al) found that off campus instructors are a demoralized bunch, perceiving poor working conditions, isolation, personal and professional deprivation.

- The hidden agendas hint that, while necessary in these stressful economic times, distance education is not a viable alternative to traditional models and, therefore, should be given only those resources necessary to make it run. Real commitment is lacking.
- When resources aren't provided to do a good job, distance programs suffer. Usually, the deficiency is in the human infrastructure needed to support students, administer programs, and train instructors and staff. As Chere and Gibson(1995) wrote: "It is sometimes easier to get a million dollars to fund a new technology system than it is to get $100,000 a year to maintain the human infrastructure. You can't have one without the

other" (p. 15). Yet, many institutions try. For whatever reasons, higher education administrators and politicians understand the need for technology. But, lacking the heart for distance education, they cannot bring themselves to support it with adequate personnel, simple supplies, and a reasonable operating budget.

- Adult learners are education consumers less likely than their traditional counterparts to accommodate inefficiency, abstruse curriculum, and teacher centered instruction. They are frustrated by institutions that promise the moon but can't deliver convenient registration procedures. They are intolerant of education models which treat them like dependent second class students instead of a valued part of the learning community. When offered curriculum and instruction better suited for eighteen year old students, they drop out. However, without a fundamental paradigm shift, many colleges and universities continue to think of distance learners as less teachable and enjoyable than traditional aged students and off campus programs as new venues for traditional academic programs rather than opportunities for change.

The Right Direction for the Wrong Reason

Distance education is a bandwagon with lots of riders and more jump on every day. Properly approached, off campus programs, however delivered, can enrich institutions and provide a valuable education service to non-

traditional learners. However, some institutions are getting into distance programming for the wrong reasons, primarily to solve budget problems, without fundamentally changing the way they do business. There is no evidence that distance programs tacked onto traditional two and four year colleges and universities are a panacea for ubiquitous money problems. There is nonetheless a pervasive belief among education decision makers that distance programs are a cash cow and, if they don't get their share, some other institution will.

Education leaders who, however covertly, believe that distance programs are the poor stepchild of higher education, send a tacit message to others that off campus programs and students are inferior. This militates against curricular and instructional adaptations for distance education and limits the amount of support provided, particularly for the human infrastructure needed to make distance programs work.

In sum, successful distance programs are developed, implemented, and evaluated as viable alternative forms of education. They are valued for their unique contributions; curriculum and instruction innovations are encouraged and rewarded; off campus programming is an integral part of the institutional mission and adequate human resources are provided.

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